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### **Central America Pact Aids National Security**

By Christopher C. Schons

WASHINGTON – Congress must ratify the pending Central American Free Trade Agreement for one reason: national security.

While much of our country's attention has been focused on Iraq, a series of troubling events, political and otherwise, have occurred in South America:

Argentina has suffered economic collapse and, despite a recent recovery, remains a financial pariah.

In oil-rich Venezuela, the erratic and autocratic President Hugo Chavez - in league with Fidel Castro of Cuba - has consolidated his power over his own dismayed population and extended his overtly anti-U.S. influence into the Caribbean and across the Andes.

Brazil has temporarily scuttled the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and, with several of its neighbors, has signed multibillion-dollar economic deals with China.

Indeed, Brasilia hosted a summit May 10 at which 33 South American and Arab heads of state reserved their most enthusiastic support for Mr. Chavez and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. U.S. sanctions against Syria were criticized and Britain's claim to the Falkland Islands was questioned.

The political situation for the United States in Latin America may become trickier next year if the mayor of Mexico City, the left-wing populist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, fulfills his current status as front-runner and wins his country's presidency.

Thus, the six presidents representing the CAFTA nations who visited Washington this month to petition Congress for ratification of the agreement must receive a resoundingly positive and conclusive response.

These six countries - Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic - make up our country's most steadfast and dependable friends in the Western Hemisphere. They have expended untold effort in agreeing to a trade accord acceptable to all parties. El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala have ratified the pact, which was signed a year ago. The Dominican Republic signed on in August.

Common arguments against CAFTA prove specious. Fears connected to the North American Free Trade Agreement ignore its success in raising real Mexican per-capita income by 5 percent and contributing to the U.S. economic boom of the 1990s. Studies show that CAFTA would create thousands of net jobs in the United States, while farm groups herald lower tariffs that would produce hundreds of millions of dollars in extra agricultural exports. The United States exports as much to Central America as to Italy and India combined.

Indeed, the regional economic, political and institutional stability fomented by CAFTA would be invaluable to the United States and the other signatories while cementing a trade relationship that is

truly equitable. For every \$1 worth of goods that Central America exports to the United States, it buys about \$1 worth of goods in return.

Compare that with the U.S. trade relationship with China: for every \$1 dollar of goods exported to the United States, China buys a mere 20 cents worth of goods in return. Those concerned - rightly - about record U.S. trade deficits have part of the solution at hand by helping take the final steps to turn CAFTA into law.

Although each of the CAFTA nations is unique, they share characteristics, including a dire need for increased investment and employment. Workers in textile and food-processing factories generally enjoy clean and modern working conditions and are paid relatively well. And while the governments of Central America have done a superb job in bringing labor codes up to and even above the standards promoted by the International Labor Organization in Geneva, the major concern in each case is generating more employment for ever-growing populations.

When job creation lags in the CAFTA countries, millions of workers - young ones, especially - must face a Hobson's choice of living in poverty, even starving in some cases, or emigrating. Thousands, as denizens of suburban areas of Virginia and Maryland know well, even take the desperate step of joining vicious transnational gangs such as the Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13. It is naive to pretend that we can insulate ourselves from the effects of a lack of economic opportunity abroad when the security of our own nation's neighborhoods is connected.

Over the past two decades, all of the CAFTA nations have struggled mightily to consolidate democracy and diversify their sources of foreign exchange earnings. This effort largely has been successful, but additional impetus is needed to continue progress. CAFTA would help lock into place deepening democracy, increased business investment, growing employment and worker choice and stronger institutions such as customs and legal systems.

These institutions would provide the United States with a dependable framework in which to collaborate on economic and security issues in an era when these have become critical. Further, Central America would serve as a bulwark against ominous signs emanating from other parts of Latin America.

So the choice presented to Congress is obvious: Ratify CAFTA and increase trade with our friends and neighbors, as the democratic governments of these six countries wish, or let CAFTA fall by the wayside, alienating close allies in a region essential to our long-term national interests.

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